

SECOND BOOK

Chapter XV. The Doctor.

As the year advanced, the servants at Mount Morven remarked that the weeks seemed to follow each other more slowly than usual. In the higher regions of the house, the same impression was prevalent; but the sense of dullness among the gentlefolks submitted to circumstances in silence.

If the question had been asked in past days: Who is the brightest and happiest member of the family? everybody would have said: Kitty. If the question had been asked at the present time, differences of opinion might have suggested different answers--but the whole household would have refrained without hesitation from mentioning the child's name.

Since Sydney Westerfield's departure Kitty had never held up her head.

Time quieted the child's first vehement outbreak of distress under the loss of the companion whom she had so dearly loved. Delicate management, gently yet resolutely applied, held the faithful little creature in check, when she tried to discover the cause of her governess's banishment from the house. She made no more complaints; she asked no more embarrassing questions--but it was miserably plain to everybody about her that she failed to recover her spirits. She was willing to learn her lessons (but not under another governess) when her mother was able to attend to her: she played with her toys, and went out riding on her pony. But the delightful gayety of other days was gone; the shrill laughter that once rang through the house was heard no more. Kitty had become a quiet child; and, worse still, a child who seemed to be easily tired.

The doctor was consulted.

He was a man skilled in the sound medical practice that learns its lessons without books--bedside practice. His opinion declared that the child's vital power was seriously lowered. "Some cause is at work here," he said to the mother, "which I don't understand. Can you help me?" Mrs. Linley helped him without hesitation. "My little daughter dearly loved her governess; and her governess has been obliged to leave us." That was her reply. The doctor

wanted to hear no more; he at once advised that Kitty should be taken to the seaside, and that everything which might remind her of the absent friend--books, presents, even articles of clothing likely to revive old associations--should be left at home. A new life, in new air. When pen, ink, and paper were offered to him, that was the doctor's prescription.

Mrs. Linley consulted her husband on the choice of the seaside place to which the child should be removed.

The blank which Sydney's departure left in the life of the household was felt by the master and mistress of Mount Morven--and felt, unhappily, without any open avowal on either side of what was passing in their minds. In this way the governess became a forbidden subject between them; the husband waited for the wife to set the example of approaching it, and the wife waited for the husband. The trial of temper produced by this state of hesitation, and by the secret doubts which it encouraged, led insensibly to a certain estrangement--which Linley in particular was morbidly unwilling to acknowledge. If, when the dinner-hour brought them together, he was silent and dull in his wife's presence, he attributed it to anxiety on the subject of his brother--then absent on a critical business errand in London. If he sometimes left the house the first thing in the morning, and only returned at night, it was because the management of the model farm had become one of his duties, in Randal's absence. Mrs. Linley made no attempt to dispute this view of the altered circumstances in home-life--but she submitted with a mind ill at ease. Secretly fearing that Linley was suffering under Miss Westerfield's absence, she allowed herself to hope that Kitty's father would see a necessity, in his own case, for change of scene, and would accompany them to the seaside.

"Won't you come with us, Herbert?" she suggested, when they had both agreed on the choice of a place.

His temper was in a state of constant irritation. Without meaning it he answered her harmless question sharply.

"How can I go away with you, when we are losing by the farm, and when there is nobody to check the ruinous expenses but myself?"

Mrs. Linley's thoughts naturally turned to Randal's prolonged absence. "What can be keeping him all this time in London?" she said.

Linley's failing patience suffered a severe trial.

"Don't you know," he broke out, "that I have inherited my poor mother's property in England, saddled with a lawsuit? Have you never heard of delays and disappointments, and quibbles and false pretenses, encountered by unfortunate wretches like me who are obliged to go to law? God only knows when Randal will be free to return, or what bad news he may bring with him when he does come back."

"You have many anxieties, Herbert; and I ought to have remembered them."

That gentle answer touched him. He made the best apology in his power: he said his nerves were out of order, and asked her to excuse him if he had spoken roughly. There was no unfriendly feeling on either side; and yet there was something wanting in the reconciliation. Mrs. Linley left her husband, shaken by a conflict of feelings. At one moment she felt angry with him; at another she felt angry with herself.

With the best intentions (as usual) Mrs. Presty made mischief, nevertheless. Observing that her daughter was in tears, and feeling sincerely distressed by the discovery, she was eager to administer consolation. "Make your mind easy, my dear, if you have any doubt about Herbert's movements when he is away from home. I followed him myself the day before yesterday when he went out. A long walk for an old woman--but I can assure you that he does really go to the farm."

Implicitly trusting her husband--and rightly trusting him--Linley's wife replied by a look which Mrs. Presty received in silent indignation. She summoned her dignity and marched out of the room.

Five minutes afterward, Mrs. Linley received an intimation that her mother was seriously offended, in the form of a little note:

"I find that my maternal interest in your welfare, and my devoted efforts to serve you, are only rewarded with furious looks. The less we see of each other the better. Permit me to thank you for your invitation, and to decline accompanying you when you leave Mount Morven tomorrow." Mrs. Linley answered the note in person. The next day Kitty's grandmother--ripe for more mischief--altered her mind, and thoroughly enjoyed her journey to the seaside.